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AUTHOR McCollester, Charles W.
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ABSTRACT

The University of Notre Dame's survey of post-graduation plans and use of the information by administrators are discussed. The survey is administered in the spring before graduation and requires 10-15 minutes to complete. It begins with information on ethnic background, sex, graduating major, freshman intent, second major, grade point average, and degree. Respondents indicate future plans, including medical or dental studies, other graduate studies, entering the labor market, temporary service with the military or a volunteer service agency, law studies, or undecided. An additional 31 questions are included in a values survey, with Likert-type response options, that measure how much impact the Notre Dame experience has had on its students in the social, religious, and ethical area. One factor that contributes to a high response rate to the survey is its anonymity. Information derived from the survey includes: tracing the response pattern by the degree received, or by other student variables; reporting the average salary of graduates who obtain jobs; reporting changes occurring in the pattern of future plans (i.e., whether more people are planning to attend medical school than in the past); and seeing how women and minorities fare in the job market and in graduate or professional studies. Additional uses of the data are covered. (SW)

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A SURVEY OF GRADUATES' FUTURE PLANS

Charles W. McCollester
Coordinator, Analytical Studies
University of Notre Dame

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No higher educational institution wants to be perceived as strictly a vocational-training school. Yet at the same time every institution likes to boast when the topic turns to the practical outcomes of its training.

In other words, while we may disdain allegations that we are in the business of training people for the most lucrative occupations, we are at the same time happy when a goodly number of our graduates wind up in these same lucrative positions. After all, wealthy alumni are not to be sneezed at!

While not all graduates start off in million dollar jobs or are accepted at the best law school with fabulous scholarships, the data are important, and the purpose of this paper is to explain how we elicit accurate information from our graduates about their post-graduation plans. We also want to illustrate how our administrators can and do use the valuable information gathered. Above all, since this is not a theoretical paper exploiting sophisticated statistical techniques, I want to present, in blue-collar, nuts-and-bolts language, the system we employ at Notre Dame that last year obtained a Survey response rate of 95% of all our graduating seniors.

We believe this rate is remarkable. We further believe the information garnered is remarkably accurate. And finally, we believe that most schools--certainly those which are comparable in size to Notre Dame, or smaller--can employ the same methods and achieve comparable results.

The University of Notre Dame enrolls approximately 9,500 students, 7,500 of them undergraduates, and 2,000 in Graduate School, MBA and Law programs. In 1985 we heard from 2,036 of all 2,196 degree-recipients; on the undergraduate level, 95.8% of the Bachelor-degree people--or 1,679 of 1,753--responded.

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Before we proceed to accounting for this phenomenal response rate, I believe we should take a look at the questionnaire we use and the set of accompanying instructions we call our "Code Book."

A close look at the questionnaire reveals that even the most meticulous respondent will never require more than 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Everyone answers the first nine items: these cover such information as Ethnic Background, Sex, Graduating Major, Freshman Intent, Second Major, GPA, Degree Being Received, and finally the $64,000 question--which of nine possible future plans the graduate intends to pursue. These nine options are: attendance at Medical School, Dental School, MBA School or Graduate School, entering on a Work Career, taking time for temporary service in the Military or with a Volunteer service agency, beginning Law School, or in rare cases, Undecided.

It should be noted that in every option for the future there will be what I call "soft" intents (which in our case have always been very few) as distinct from "firm" intents. The soft intents consist of those people who indicate only that they want to pursue a particular goal, such as medical school, perhaps. The firm intents, on the other hand, are those who not only want to pursue medical training, but have applied to one or more schools, have been accepted or rejected, and if accepted, have said they intend to attend a particular school. In other words, our questionnaire plumbs the depth of the graduate's interest in a field, and does not record vague desires as actualities.

After picking a particular intent, respondents answer specific sections. All bachelor-degree recipients are, in addition, asked to answer 31 questions at the end, which we call a Values survey.

These Values questions, which are mostly answerable on a Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, 5-point spectrum, have been designed jointly by several

Notre Dame Theology and Sociology faculty members. They are extensions of questions asked incoming freshmen and are designed to measure how much impact the Notre Dame experience has had on its students in the social-religious-ethical area. Obviously, the impact of other factors such as maturation is acknowledged; the goal of this values survey remains to determine how much of the effect of any changes in values systems can be attributed to the students' experience at Notre Dame and to determine whether these changes are desirable or undesirable.

The accompanying set of instructions, or Code Book, carries a coded list of States for Questionnaire item 3, a coded list of majors, instructions for responding to the Law School Intent section, a list of all accredited U.S. law schools, and the items on Values.

We have expanded these instructions and modified the questionnaire form itself for the 1986 administration; for example, we have separated the gender identification item from the ethnic background block on the questionnaire, and we have called attention to this in the Code Book. The reason for this is that we were getting up to 5% of our responses from people who did not declare their sex identification. We tend to think that this omission was due more to their overlooking the item on a cluttered questionnaire than to difficulty in making an accurate sexual self-identification.

We added other cautions, examples, and guidelines to the 1986 code book, hoping thereby to dispel all sources of confusion. But by and large, the Survey of Future Plans of Graduates has not undergone any substantial change.

Let us now see how we administered the Survey in 1985. (In this year of 1986 we have changed again, not of our own volition; the Registrar's office, because of internal problems, decided that the dates of administration will be from March 12 to May 15.)

(1) As noted above, the survey is administered through the Registrar's

office. The rationale is simple: Among its tasks, the Registrar compiles the annual Graduation List and is the dispenser of tickets to graduation exercises. Students are notified to visit the Registrar's office and approve the spelling and order of their name, and to indicate how they wish their name listed on the diploma and on the graduation program. At this time, they also answer our Survey; in fact, they do not receive the coveted tickets to graduation for their relatives and friends until they have completed the Survey.

One might say that this is blackmail, and of course such a complaint would be correct. But in self-defense, it is done politely, and if any student objects to answering the questionnaire, he or she will still receive the proper allotment of tickets. However, we don't broadcast this exemption. And the bottom line is that remarkably few take advantage of it.

Another feature of our Survey that contributes to the high response rate--and this is probably the most important factor of all--is its anonymity. We ask for neither a name nor an identification number. It has been pointed out to us on numerous occasions that if we asked for at least a Social Security number, we would not have to ask many background questions like Sex, Major, GPA and Degree being Received. That is true, but we feel strongly that the anonymity of our Survey is a real factor in its success, and above all, we feel that in an age where privacy is persistently and unnecessarily invaded, our hands-off policy will be perceived as refreshing.

(2) In 1985, the Survey was conducted in one week's time, immediately prior to Commencement. Despite our worst fears, this compressed Survey period brought us the highest response rate ever. And more importantly, responses were much more definitive, since by 15 May, jobs were usually nailed down, admission to law, medical, and other graduate schools was more certain--all in all, not only was the percentage of responses greater than ever; the data we collected reflected less guesswork and had a firmer basis than ever before.

In 1986, we are back to the March 15-May 15 Survey administration dates. It will be interesting to see how the 1986 responses measure up to 1985.

You will note that we provide codes for all accredited law schools in the United States. Thus, since law school intents apply to an average of 4-plus law schools each, we are able to determine readily which law schools tend to accept which majors, which levels of GPA are acceptable by individual schools, whether specific law schools emphasize GPA or LSAT scores, or both, etc.--in other words, all information that will be helpful to law school intents and to their advisers.

Since graduate schools (for convenience, I include Medical, Dental and other such schools in this group) are so many, we only code these after the fact, so that we may devote special attention to where the respondent has been accepted and to the school he/she plans to attend. Thus, our data for these areas is less complete than for law school intents. One of the reasons for this is historical: Our first survey, in 1971, was designed for law school intents only, and thus our information-gathering in this area has always been more complete.

Our questionnaire, samples of which are attached to copies of this paper, is a two-sided form designed to be optically scanned by a Westinghouse 201 scanner.

After I do a preliminary editing job, assigning codes to Graduate, Medical, Dental and MBA schools cited on the questionnaire, and insuring that the Law School which a graduate plans to attend is one by which he or she has been accepted, the questionnaires are scanned. In the scanning process, a four-digit ID number is imprinted on the form, and the printout shows all the data that the questionnaire form contains for the number assigned.

Then, the responses are sorted, usually according to specific Future Plans. For example, if a graduating student indicates in Item 9 that he/she

plans to go to Graduate School, his or her future intent is a "4." All "4s" are then output together, perhaps in sequence according to whether male or female, or some other identifier. The same procedure is followed for each of the other eight future plans.

The output to which I have just referred is rather inelegantly described as a "dump." Its importance is crucial, however, in that it contains all possible data and makes it possible for the analyst to verify, for instance, that black undergraduate males interested in Careers enjoyed an 80% success rate (i.e., in landing a job) as compared to the rate for all males of 67%.

Now--what kind of information do we derive from our Survey of Future Plans?

Let me give you a brief rundown of what we were able to report last year:

(1) We were able to trace the response pattern according to the degree the individual respondent receives. This ability likewise holds for the other items in the identification block, such as sex, ethnic background, major, GPA, etc. The pattern displayed according to these variables corresponds closely to the actual demography of our student body.

(2) We can also report the average salary to be received by successful job-seekers, and prior to that we know the job-search success rate itself by sex, discipline, degree, GPA range, etc.

(3) We are able to report any changes occurring in the pattern of future plans--are more people planning to attend medical school than has been the case in the past? The Survey has been conducted for about 10 years, with few substantial format changes; hence changes in the pattern of future plans become obvious.

(4) How are women and ethnic minorities faring in the job market, in entrance to MBA, Law and other schools?

(5) Are the numbers of students joining Volunteer Service increasing or

decreasing? And from what disciplines do they come?

(6) Can the state of the economy be interpreted as having an impact on the number of Undecideds?

These are but a few of the questions that even a cursory analysis of survey results can answer.

We also can learn if our enrollment pattern is changing. Invariably, Notre Dame has students from all 50 states, but it is important to know in which states enrollment is increasing or decreasing. Interpolation of our figures for graduates against total enrollment can yield this kind of information. Knowing the simple facts often triggers a not-so-simple inquiry.

Again, it proves helpful to measure the success rate of our students, by male and female, in the various intents to which they aspire. For example, in 1985, 516 of 710 male respondents (or 72.7%) were successful in obtaining jobs while the same was true for 210 of 305 females (68.9%). What does this mean, we ask, even as we recall that the survey took place in May, and that many--or most--of the unsuccessful job-seekers will be successful during the summer months. The answer to such a question must be considered from many perspectives: How does this result compare with the results of other years? What disciplines do men and/or women tend to concentrate in? Are successful job-seekers embarking on careers they want, or are they accepting second choices?

One of the more intriguing ongoing studies carried out through the annual surveys is what we call "Student Flow." One item the graduate answers pertains to what the respondent's academic intent was as a freshman; another asks what the graduate's final major is.

We realize, of course, that any switch in majors that may be revealed by responses to these items may mask several other switches--in the 2nd and 3rd

years, for example. Yet, we believe that even when incomplete, such data are valuable.

Let us take the examples of a large and a small department. The large department, Chemical Engineering, shows 62 individuals graduating with this major. Thirty-seven of these 62 were also Freshman Intents in Chemical Engineering, meaning that 25 transferred into this discipline from other departments. And we can list out these other departments and pore over them for clues as to why students may have transferred.

But we also know that 100 respondents say that their freshman intent was Chemical Engineering. Since 37 freshman intents graduated in this same Chemical Engineering major, we know that 63 must have gone elsewhere. Again, we can readily ascertain the departments they switched to, and in what numbers.

An example of a smaller department (except for service courses) might be Philosophy, which had 24 majors in the 1985 graduating class. Since there were only six Freshman Intents in Philosophy, and four of these apparently perservered to graduation, it would be helpful for a Philosophy department chairman to know <u>why</u> the other 20 final majors transferred in. He might very well also want to know, how can I do better than attract a "measly" six freshman intents?

Overall, we discovered that even with considerable data missing, we could state that in the four undergraduate colleges at Notre Dame, 39% finished in the major they had intended as freshmen, and 53% finished within the same college, although 14% were not in exactly the same disciplines.

Advisers for Law School Intents find our section on Law Schools quite useful. For each school with which even a single application was filed by a Notre Dame student, an historical account of transactions is presented. For example, let us take the Harvard University Law School, to which 20 prospective

Notre Dame graduates applied. What do we know of these people? We know that there are 16 males, 3 females, and 1 Sex Unknown in the group, we know that these 20 applicants had a mean GPA of 3.70 and a mean LSAT of 41.1. And we know they came from 12 different disciplines.

We know the same facts about those who were accepted, rejected, placed on a waiting list, or for whom there was as yet No Decision.

We likewise know how many of the acceptees plan to attend Harvard, and the attendees' home states. This latter fact may seem unimportant or irrelevant, but it can tell us (1) if a student plans to attend a school in his home state, and (2) if a state school is in question (which will of course be cheaper for residents of that state), we gain an idea of the state of the economy and how it impacts our students.

As you can see, there is nothing esoteric in the information we gather. We do feel, however, that the unusually high response rate bestows a validity on our data that might not be otherwise forthcoming.

The objection is often raised that because our data are gathered prior to graduation, it tends to measure intentions only and that the reality is totally different. Aside from the fact that in an anonymous survey, there is small inducement to lie or to boast, we have tested out our career data against placement office records and find that our data hold up very well. We also discover that data such as GPA and other demographic information in the University data bank coincide with the demographic data our graduates supply us anonymously.

Our Career and Placement office keeps records by name of individuals and names of companies for those who receive and accept job offers. In our survey we elicit responses, as well, from Career Intents who do not go through Placement. But in general our figures are close to those of Placement.

Actually, the Career or job option, while the most popular of the "future plans," is only one of nine such options. Placement does not operate in the area of applications and acceptances to law or graduate school, to MBA, Dental or Medical School, nor for that matter in the area of temporary duty, as in Military or Voluntary Service; nor does it count the people who are undecided.

We have found over the years that certain popular options for Notre Dame students, such as Medical and Law schools, require early applications and by and large receive early notification of acceptance or non-acceptance. In both these cases--Law and Medicine--advisers in those areas keep their own records. Our results compare very well; in fact, the future plans survey figures are usually conservative, in the sense that they show a slightly lower success rate, since we do not capture complete data on certain successful applicants who at the time of our survey may not have decided which of several law schools they will attend.

Overall, where accuracy is concerned, I believe our data, though gathered before Commencement and provided anonymously, stand up remarkably well in comparison to data gathered in other ways.

In conclusion, I urge you to consider your own situation. Should you decide a Notre Dame-type survey would be feasible for your institution, you can count on our help. As the Mayor of Carmel, California, has said: "Make my Day."